The Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey

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The findings in this report are based on data collected in the sixth Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS). This survey is part of an on-going study of the quality of life in Nebraska conducted by the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The sample for NASIS consists of 1907 respondents eighteen years of age or older residing in households in Nebraska. The sample is selected through a process called random digit dialing: within each three-digit prefix in the state, four-digit numbers are selected randomly from all possible four-digit numbers to complete the telephone number. Respondents are further chosen randomly from the adults in the household and interviewed by telephone by experienced, professional interviewers from the offices of the Bureau of Sociological Research. All interviewing was done between February and April of 1982. This procedure produces a high-quality, representative sample of Nebraska adults. Analysis shows the sample to be representative of the state on age, sex, race, and geographical distribution.

The interview averaged approximately 47 minutes and included questions about energy use, health, recreation, political attitudes, occupation, education, family life, and other matters reflecting the quality of life experienced in the state. For the entire sample, the chances are 95 in 100 that the true value for the population lies within a range equal to the reported survey percentage plus or minus 2.24 percent. This is an estimate of maximum error and for most items the percentages are likely to be even more accurate.

The data gathered by NASIS are used by a wide variety of State and local government agencies for policy and program planning and by faculty and students at the University of Nebraska and other colleges for research. No information identifying any respondent is released to any user and the strict confidentiality of individual respondents is rigidly enforced. While the final responsibility for the organization and structure of the survey and for reports produced under its name rests with the Bureau of Sociological Research, public agencies and University departments play an integral part in planning the survey through an Advisory Committee. Public organizations interested in membership on the Advisory Committee should contact the NASIS Study Director.

Funding for NASIS comes from the University of Nebraska, the Bureau of Sociological Research and State and local agencies which buy items and data analysis from the survey.

The NASIS surveys are repeated each year to measure changes in the quality of life in Nebraska. While there is a core of questions which is included every year, each survey has a large component of unique items which address specific topical issues. Plans for future years include reinterviewing the 1977 panel every two years to assess changes in their lives. Additional detail on the NASIS surveys regarding use of the survey data or cost of purchasing items on future surveys can be obtained by contacting the NASIS Study Director at the Bureau of Sociological Research or by sending for a copy of the 1983 NASIS Prospectus.

Social Responses to Scarcity

Some scientists are predicting Americans will face shortages of vital resources within the next generation, so that many individuals will have insufficient food, fuel or water. As part of the 1982 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey a sample of 960 adults were asked about the prospects of scarcity and how it might affect them.

Prospects of Scarcity

Survey respondents were asked: "Some people are predicting that Americans will face shortages of vital resources within the next generation, so that many people will be unable to get enough food, fuel, or water. What do you think? Do you believe that people in this country will face severe shortages? A majority (55 percent) believed that there would be severe shortages. Of those who believed there would be shortages, 68 percent (or 36 percent of all people) thought they would occur within the next ten years and 75 percent believed that the scarcity would affect them personally. Only a minority thought, however, that these shortages would be permanent.

Those Already Affected

Some claim that the recent increases in the cost of fuel and food are indicators of the beginning stages of worldwide scarcity. While we cannot say whether it is scarce resources, deteriorating economic conditions, or some combination of the two, we can document the number of Nebraskans who are affected by the high cost of food and fuel. Respondents were asked: "Has the increased cost of fuel and food led to a reduction in your family's standard of living in the past three years?" Fifty-one percent reported a decline in their standard of living. Moreover, the vast majority (86 percent) of those who suffered such a decline felt that it would continue for

another five years. In other words, people who have experienced a decline in their standard of living are not optimistic about a recovery in the next year or two.

How Will Scarcity Affect Peoples Lives?

We are interested in trying to understand how long term scarcity, if it becomes a reality, might affect individual attitudes and behaviors. Do people facing scarcity cut down on their contact with friends and relatives as a way of conserving resources? Do they become more critical of public officials? Do they become more politically active, push for economic reform or become more conservative or liberal in their approach to solving problems? Questions asked in the 1982 NASIS allowed us to examine these issues.

We divided people into four groups depending on their beliefs about the likelihood of scarcity and whether or not they had experienced a decline in their standard of living. These categories are: (1) people who do not believe Americans face scarcity and have not experienced a decline in their standard of living; (2) people who do not believe Americans face scarcity, but have suffered a standard of living decline; (3) people who do believe Americans face scarcity and have not experienced an economic decline, and (4) people who do believe Americans face scarcity and who have suffered a decline in their standard of living in the last three years. We reasoned that people who believed scarcity was inevitable in the near future would be much more likely to change their lifestyle or attitudes if they had experienced a recent decline in their standard of living. The proportion of people in each category of scarcity and economic decline is shown in Table 1.

It is clear that many people (65 percent) who have experienced a decline in their standard of living do not attribute it to resource scarcity. On the other hand, more than half (58 percent) of those who believe resource scarcity is a problem facing Americans have had their standard of living eroded. Let us compare the responses of people who think scarcity is not a problem with those who do according to whether or not they have experienced a decline in the standard of living. Data on the quality of social relations, attitudes toward public officials, political activity, economic reform, and the tendency to favor conservative methods for solving problems are shown for these four categories of respondents in Table 2.

Contact with Relatives and Friends. It is clear that a decline in the standard of living depresses visiting, entertaining and exchanging gifts with friends and relatives. Believing that Americans are facing a severe shortage in the next ten years appears to depress social relations among these individuals even further. The data provide clear evidence that a decline in standard of living is associated with reduced contact with friends and relatives, especially contacts that cost money - entertaining, exchanging gifts, and traveling. The effects of a belief in long-term scarcity are much smaller. It appears that the depressing effect of this belief may be strongest for those who have already experienced a declining standard of living. Few respondents who are maintaining - or improving - their standard of living are cutting down on social activities regardless of their beliefs about long-term scarcity.

Confidence in Public Officials. The threat of scarcity and decline in the standard of living does not seem to cause people to become more or less critical of public officials. Nor does scarcity cause them to become more

or less trusting of community leaders.

Political Activity. While it appears that scarcity and economic hard times do not stimulate people to favor protest political activity, a further analysis suggests that political response to hard times varies by education. People with education beyond high school are more apt to favor protest politics if they believe Americans are facing scarcity and have experienced an economic decline themselves. As the data in Table 3 show 91 percent of these highly educated individuals find protest meetings, rallies, or marches an acceptable form of political activity, while only two-thirds of those not believing in scarcity are in this category. Among those with no post high school education, a belief in long-term scarcity is associated with less approval of protest activities. In this group, generally less than half favor such activity. Refusal to break a law as a form of political activity was favored by less than a quarter of the respondents. However, those who did not believe Americans are facing scarcity and who did not experience an economic decline were least likely to favor this form of political activity. Thus, scarcity would seem to stimulate some political activity only among the highly educated who experienced a decline in their standard of living.

Economic Reform. Scarcity, especially when accompanied by a decline in the individual's standard of living, is likely to cause people to call for some redistribution of income. Basically, they are more likely to favor income being taken from the affluent and given to those who are suffering. Yet, not a majority favor this.

Use of Traditional Means to Solve Problems. While not sizable, there is a tendency among those who believe in scarcity and those who have witnessed a decline in their standard of living to return to traditional ways

of doing things. They are reluctant to try new things, change their ways, or to take risks. While returning to tradition may be a safe way to conserve resources, it may retard the development of new ways to solve the problems associated with scarcity and economic decline. High school graduates and those with less education were especially likely to develop a conservative approach. Among those with some formal training beyond high school, the opposite pattern was found. That is, they were less likely to be conservative in their approach to solving problems. This finding parallels the tendency reported earlier for those with more education to favor political activities. Thus, among persons who may be the most likely individuals to find a solution to resource problems, the tendency is to explore less traditional approaches for dealing with scarcity.

Summary

A majority of Nebraskans believe Americans are going to face severe shortages, but only 36 percent think that it is going to occur within the next ten years. While half of Nebraska's population has experienced a decline in their standard of living within the last three years, only 42 percent of these individuals also believe scarce food, fuel, or water is on the horizon. The responses of individuals who believe in scarcity and report an economic decline is to: (1) cut back on visiting, entertaining, and exchanging gifts with friends and relatives; (2) advocate protest politics (if they have more than a high school education) and civil disobedience; (3) favor redistributing income so that more goes to those in need; and (4) rely on more traditional means to solve problems if they have no post high school training, but explore less conservative approaches if they have more education.

A decline in the quality of family relations seems to be inevitable should scarce resources become a reality. While civil disobedience and protest activities are favored by those in need, it is apt to involve only a few among those with above average educations, a pattern found throughout the history of civil disorder. No doubt, the political activists as well as deprived people in general will favor economic reform where the affluent will be asked to share their resources with individuals whose standard of living has declined. Finally, deprived people (except those with more education) will have a tendency to favor traditional means to solve problems rather than new and creative approaches.

Table 1.

Beliefs About Scarcity in Next 10 Years and Changes in the Standard of Living.

Beliefs About Scarcity in Next Ten Years	Changes in Standard of Living	Percent
Do not believe Americans will face severe shortages	Experienced no decline in their standard of living	34
Do not believe Americans will face severe shortages	Experienced a decline in their standard of living	30
Believe Americans will face severe shortages	Experienced no decline in their standard of living	15
Believe Americans will face severe shortages	Experienced a decline in their standard of living	21
		100%

Table 2.

Scarcity, Economic Decline and Peoples Attitudes and Behavior.

	Do Not Believe Americans Will Face Severe Scarcity Within Ten Years		Believe Americans Will Face Severe Scarcity Within Ten Years	
	Standard of Living		Standard of Living	
	Did Not Decline	Declined	Did Not Decline	Declined
Contact with Friends and Relatives				
Percent who report that during last three years -				
traveled to visit friends and relatives less often than usual	27	52	29	57*
entertained friends and relatives less often than used to	18	34	19	42*
exchanging gifts with friends and relatives less than before	32	38	25	44*
Confidence in Public Officials				
Percent who felt that -				
"When there are shortages, people should not be critical of elected officials even if they disagree with them"	47	49	46	49
"We should trust elected officials to do what is best in the event of shortages"	69	69	69	64
Political Activity				
Percent who think that during a shortage it is acceptable to -				
take part in a protest meeting, rally or march	50	53	50	51
refuse to obey a law that they think is unfair	12	19	21	20*

Table 2.

Scarcity, Economic Decline and Peoples Attitudes and Behavior. (continued)

	Do Not Believe Americans Will Face Severe Scarcity Within Ten Years		Believe Americans Will Face Severe Scarcity Within Ten Years	
	Standard of Living		Standard of Living	
	Did Not Decline	Declined	Did Not Decline	Declined
Economic Reform				
Percent who felt that -				
"During hard times, money should be taken from the rich and given to the poor"	26	32	35	48*
"When there are shortages the poor should have to look after themselves"	25	21	26	30
Use of Traditional Means to Solve Problems				
Percent who believe that -				
"It is better to stick by what you have than to be trying new things you don't really know about"	52	51	46	58
"If you start trying to change things very much, you usually make them worse"	33	37	38	43
"I would want to know that something would really work before I would be willing to take a chance on it"	59	62	65	68
	N = 311	N = 142	N = 273	N = 196

[1]Adjusted for sex, age and education of respondent.

*These differences are statistically significant, that is, they are unlikely to be the result of chance fluctuations and are probably very close to the answers we would get if all Nebraskans were interviewed. In comparisons without the asterisk, differences are too small to determine whether the pattern is real or the result of chance fluctuations.

Table 3.

Scarcity, Level of Education and Attitudes Toward Protest Politics.

	Do Not Believe Americans Will Face Severe Scarcity Within Ten Years		Believe Americans Will Face Severe Scarcity Within Ten Years	
	Standard of Living		Standard of Living	
	Did Not Decline	Declined	Did Not Decline	Declined
Percent who think that, during a shortage, it is acceptable to take part in a protest meeting, rally, or march.				
No training beyond High School	45 (219)	52 (202)	36 (97)	42 (160)
				p .01
Post High School Education	66 (79)	68 (59)	84 (38)	91 (23)

List of reports already released using data gathered in the 1982 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. These may be purchased at the indicated price from the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Report Number	Title
1.	Designs, Procedures, Instruments and Forms for the 1982 NASIS. Helen A. Moore. Price: $7.50.
2.	Attitudes Toward Social Security. Warren Luckner. Price: $1.25.
3.	Community Colleges and Higher Education. Helen A. Moore. Price: $1.00.
4.	The Status of Older Nebraskans. Jane C. Ollenburger and the Bureau of Sociological Research. Price: $1.50.